

Creating an Effective Child Welfare Training System

What is an effective child welfare training system?

The value of training in a child welfare agency cannot be overstated. The first round of the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) only served to heighten the importance of an effective training system in advancing the organizational and practice improvements agencies are undertaking to achieve better outcomes for children and their families.

A child welfare training system includes all training related policies, resources, procedures, structures and curricula combined into a coherent whole to provide and support formal and informal instruction, learning opportunities and professional development aimed at improving agency outcomes. It is essential to understand how these individual elements of a training system are integrated as well as recognize the relationship of the training system to other internal management systems and external stakeholder organizations that support the work and mission of the agency.

Effective training systems should serve as a strategic management tool integrated into the fabric of the child welfare agency and service delivery system. The training system should support:

- **The agency's management and other internal systems** —

The executive leadership of the child welfare agency is responsible for defining, communicating and clarifying the organization's mission, goals, values and outcomes. The training system can partner with the executive leadership team to promote an environment that supports continuous learning, practice improvements, innovation and professional development for all agency personnel.

- **Supervisors** — Supervisors are the link between administrators and frontline workers.

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When supervisors play a pivotal role in training and mentoring staff and teams, workers are better able to apply learning. Clearly, supervisors need frequent, diverse and regular opportunities to be supported in the vital role they play in assuring that organizational and family goals are achieved. The training system should develop supervisory staff as a key intervention point for improving the interactions among the executive leadership team, other internal systems, social work

staff, partners and children and families.

- **Case Practice Model** — The CFSR has found that a family's interactions with agency staff have powerful effects on outcomes. What happens between the caseworker and the family during visits and contacts, how families' needs are assessed and matched to services, the quality of the case planning and the effectiveness of strategies used to engage the family can significantly impact outcomes. The training system should explain, clarify and reinforce the agency's clinical practice model with a focus on these key points of leverage for improving outcomes.

- **External Partnerships** — Child welfare agencies do their work in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders, all of whom should build a common knowledge base through consistent, on-going training and cross training provided by the training system.

Assessing the effectiveness of your training system — an approach

Looking at training from a systemic perspective is an innovative way to think about assessing training. Child welfare agencies have traditionally

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focused on the individual components of a training program such as the training division's structure and placement within the organization, trainers, content areas, training classes and other events delivered by the training program. In fact, there is a great deal of excellent work already available or currently being done by child welfare agencies in the areas of designing and evaluating training curricula, and establishing human services staff development and training programs. Conducting a system-level assessment that analyzes how the training system is integrated into the overall effort to improve outcomes for children, youth and families helps child welfare agency managers move from simply overseeing training programs to understanding how an effective training system can serve as a strategic tool to help the agency achieve goals and outcomes.

The purpose of a training system assessment is to identify the extent to which your agency's training system contains the components necessary to have a positive impact on children's safety, well-being and permanency. This

assessment approach focuses on the entire training system and its relationship with other internal systems and stakeholder organizations that support the work and mission of the agency, not on the individual training classes and events delivered by the system. The aim is for a strengths-based, participatory assessment process, with broad involvement of internal and external stakeholders. The results of the assessment process should, at minimum, include:

1. a shared understanding of the strategic value and role of the training system to the agency's achievement of family, worker and organizational outcomes;
2. information about the extent to which the training system is aligned with and supportive of the organization's mission, values and outcomes; and
3. components of the training system that need management attention and action.

The training system assessment can be carried out in three phases:

- up-front commitment, planning and communication;
- information gathering and analysis; and

- reporting and using the results.

We can help assess the training system. The NRCOI has published a *Training System Assessment Guide for Child Welfare Agencies*. This guide provides performance principles, related indicators and tools that a child welfare agency can use to assess the extent to which its training system contains and integrates the components necessary to positively impact children's safety, well-being, and permanency.

We can help you think through an assessment of your agency's training system to ensure that the assessment meets the needs of your agency and helps you achieve desired outcomes. Specifically, we can help you identify an effective assessment approach, develop performance principles and indicators, and customize the training, implementation process and assessment tool so they reflect local factors such as your agency's management priorities, the current status of your training system, laws, policies, and regulations.

For more information: Contact Gretchen Robbins at the NRCOI, by phone (207-626-5224) or email (robbins@usm.maine.edu).

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